
Child Maltreatment and the Use of Social Services

MARCIA G. ORY, PhD
JO ANNE L. EARP, ScD

THE EXTENT OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT is beginning to be recognized by health professionals, social service practitioners, and policymakers alike (1–5). Although the actual evidence of child maltreatment is hard to ascertain, more than 500,000 cases of child abuse and neglect were reported in 1977 (6). Recent data from a national representative sample indicate that family violence is even more pervasive than originally thought; an estimated 1.7 million American children aged 3 to 7 are severely abused each year (7).

An important aspect of the prevention and treatment of child maltreatment is the identification of the children at risk of, as well as those already subject to, child abuse and neglect (8,9). Federal and State laws are being enacted to identify and deal with the persons who mistreat children (10–13). For example, the North Carolina Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Law that took effect in 1972 mandates that a wide range of public workers, including health professionals, social service practitioners, and educators, shall report all suspected cases of child abuse and neglect. This reporting law further specifies that suspected cases be referred to a central location, usually the public social service agency, for further investigation and action.

Dr. Ory, who at the time of the study was assistant professor, department of public health, University of Alabama Medical Center, Birmingham, is currently a master of public health student at the Johns Hopkins University School of Hygiene and Public Health, Baltimore, Md. Dr. Earp is assistant professor, department of health education, School of Public Health, Rosenau Hall, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, N.C. 27514.

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Although legal action against the perpetrator is taken in more extreme cases of child abuse and neglect, a guiding principle of social service practice has been to try to keep the child in the family unless the danger of physical or psychological harm is imminent (14–16). However, when the child remains in the family, social services and individual counseling are often needed to help parents acquire necessary childrearing skills and learn to cope better with problems of daily living, as well as to help the parents reduce financial and other family stresses. Even though the treatment norm has been to work within the family setting to prevent the recurrence of child maltreatment, few researchers have systematically examined the amount and kind of social services delivered to parents who have been reported for child maltreatment.

Study Goals and Methods

To determine the amount and kind of social services received by families in which a parent was reported for child maltreatment, we conducted a secondary analysis of 100 case histories selected from the social service records of a department of social services (DSS) in a North Carolina county. We also sought to observe the pattern of use of social services by these families over time and to discover what, if any, factors were associated with the kind of social services they received. A target group of 50 families that had been reported to the DSS for child maltreatment and a comparison group of 50 families that had never been so reported were selected for the analysis.

We surveyed all available confirmed or “highly suspected” child maltreatment cases reported to the coun-

ty's protective service unit that (a) had been reported to the DSS between 1972 and 1976, (b) involved children 6 years of age or younger, (c) involved abusive or neglectful behavior of a parent, and (d) involved children born to mothers aged 12–29 years.

These criteria were imposed for several reasons. First, because data sets available before the North Carolina Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Law took effect in 1972 were incomplete, only cases reported in 1972 or later were considered for inclusion in the study. Second, the study population was restricted to parents with children 6 years or younger in order to have a population of relatively homogeneous age and hence, to control the numerous extraneous factors that might affect the hypothesized relationship between early motherhood and child maltreatment. We considered these somewhat rigid criteria for selection of the study population necessary because authors of other studies of child abuse and neglect have suggested that the etiological factors implicated in the mistreatment of children of different ages vary widely (17). Third, although the phenomenon of child maltreatment is viewed as a "family affair" in which both parents are considered either actively or passively involved, in our research the mother was arbitrarily selected as the criterion parent since we believed that she would most likely be the primary caretaker. The mother's status was used primarily in measuring certain sociodemographic factors, such as education or employment status, that are usually identifiable on an individual rather than a familial level. Last, when there were multiple sequential reports of maltreatment of the same child, the earliest reported incident was chosen as the criterion. In fami-

lies in which more than one child had been maltreated, the oldest child who was 6 years or younger was designated as the study child.

For the comparison group, we needed families for whom secondary data similar to those for the target group were already available. Because there was no existing countywide information on families unless they were listed with a health or social agency, the comparison families were also selected from the case records maintained by the county department of social services. Of the various kinds of families served by the DSS, we selected housing recipients because we believed that like the group identified as having maltreated a child, they would have more comprehensive and up-to-date records than other DSS clients, would be more like the target group in family structures and income ranges, and would have received variable, rather than excessively high or low, numbers of social services.

The first 50 cases meeting the following criteria were therefore selected from the public housing recipient files of the same DSS as the target group: (a) listed with the DSS for at least 1 year, (b) no known report of child abuse or neglect in client's history, (c) at least 1 child 6 years or younger in the home, and (d) mother 29 years or younger at time of the study child's birth. To parallel the demographic characteristics of the target families as closely as possible, the oldest child among the children in the family 6 years old or younger was designated as the study child.

Five Major Variables Studied

To describe the clients in this study, five major variables, in addition to standard sociodemographic factors, were recorded from the case records: (a) characteris-

tics of the child mistreatment, (b) level of social service utilization, (c) degree of social disorganization within the family, (d) family structure, and (e) mother's age.

Child maltreatment. Child maltreatment refers to the first confirmed or highly suspected incident of parental abuse or neglect, or both, between 1972 and 1976 that involved a child 6 years old or younger. Two factors were analyzed: the kind of maltreatment (whether abuse, neglect, both, or neither) and the severity of maltreatment (rated on a 6-point scale ranging from no medical treatment required—zero points—to a fatality or removal of child from home—5 points). In our study, the distinction between child maltreatment and no maltreatment was based only on reported incidences. Since we suspect that biases exist in respect to the kinds of people who get reported for child abuse and neglect, this variable can be viewed only as an approximate indicator of child maltreatment. The term “at time of the incident” refers to the date that the formal investigative report was issued, but we recognized that the child maltreatment incident undoubtedly had occurred sometime before that date and that the social service authorities were also likely to have been involved in the case before the official filing of the child maltreatment report.

Social service utilization. The use of social services is an indicator of the amount of institutional support available to the mother and her family. For the target group, the number of services provided to the family in three periods was noted: (a) in the year before the reported maltreatment incident, (b) at the time of the incident, and (c) 1 year after the incident had been reported. Since for the comparison group there was no comparable maltreatment incident, the criterion incident was defined as the family's last contact with the DSS. Services for the comparison group were measured twice: 1 year before the last contact of DSS with the family (that is, before the incident) and again at the last recorded contact (at the time of the incident). Social service utilization refers to casework counseling, homemaker services, day care, health services, AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children), food stamps, family planning, mental health counseling, social security, WIN (work incentive program), vocational rehabilitation, and other community resources. All of the different kinds of services used at the time of the incident were tabulated, but only the most heavily used services were recorded for all three periods.

Social disorganization. The third major variable, the caseworker's perception of the family's degree of social

disorganization, was conceptualized as being the presence of disorganization at the individual, family, and community level. On the individual level, the psychological as well as the physical characteristics of both parents and their children was assessed. From information in the DSS records, a general index of psychological disorganization was compiled that would indicate the presence of mental health problems, alcohol or drug dependency, mental retardation, or other personality disorders. To determine the familial level of social disorganization, the family's stability over time and the quality of family relationships were assessed. The degree of family disorganization was measured by the presence or absence of membership fluctuations (that is, whether and how many family members moved in or out of the mother's household) and family disturbances (that is, whether there was either general family discord or previous family violence). The family's level of community disorganization was characterized along two dimensions: the existence of prior police or court records and, also, the degree of social isolation reported in the DSS records. The overall level of social disorganization was measured by a summated scale, which combined the separate indices of disorganization at the psychological, familial, and community level.

Family structure. Family structure is a variable representing the social support potentially available to the mother. It was measured by the mother's marital status and the kind and size of her kinship network. Although most family variables were based on data derived from reports at the time of the incident, the mother's marital status was measured at the time of birth of the study child (married or not married) as well as at the time of the incident (never married, previously married, or currently married). A second measure of family structure, the kinship network, was broken into three categories: (a) mothers living alone with their child or children, (b) mothers and their child or children living in an extended family network, and (c) married mothers living alone with their spouse and child or children.

Mother's age. For our analysis, the mother's age was measured at the time her first child was born as well as at the time of the criterion incident. The mother's age was also measured in two different ways: continuously from 12 to 29 years, to permit an age-graded analysis, and dichotomously, to permit an examination of the differences between “teenage” mothers who began their childbearing during adolescence (12–19 years) and “adult” mothers who had postponed childbearing until adulthood (20–29 years).

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of mothers in the target and comparison groups

Characteristics of mother	Target group		Comparison group	
	Number ¹	Percent	Number ¹	Percent
Age at first birth:				
12-19 years	35	70.0	34	68.0
20-29 years	15	30.0	16	32.0
	$\chi^2 = .00, P = 1.00$			
Annual family income:				
Less than \$3,000 ..	28	63.6	33	73.3
\$3,000-\$6,999	13	29.5	10	22.2
\$7,000 and over ...	3	6.8	2	4.4
	$\chi^2 = 0.99, P = 0.61$			
Employment:				
Unemployed	35	72.9	31	67.4
Employed	13	27.1	15	32.6
	$\chi^2 = 0.13, P = 0.72$			
Education:				
Less than high school	16	34.8	3	7.7
Some high school ..	23	50.0	24	61.5
High school diploma	7	15.2	12	30.8
	$\chi^2 = 9.72, P < 0.007, \text{Tau C} = 0.32$			
Marital status:				
Never married	14	28.0	24	48.0
Previously married ..	20	40.0	18	36.0
Currently married ..	16	32.0	8	16.0
	$\chi^2 = 5.40, P = 0.07$			
Ethnicity:				
American Indian ...	22	44.0	5	10.4
Black	15	30.0	42	87.5
White	13	26.0	1	2.1
	$\chi^2 = 33.75, P < 0.001, \text{Tau C} = 0.50$			

¹ For each characteristic, N = 50 unless information is missing.

Sociodemographic characteristics. The major sociodemographic, familial, and child maltreatment characteristics of the families surveyed in this study will be only briefly summarized here, since they are discussed elsewhere (18). As indicated in table 1, the study population was composed mainly of young and socioeconomically deprived families that were characterized by poor income, little education, and significant unemployment. Most of the mothers in both groups had been teenagers at the time of birth of their first child (70 percent of the target mothers and 68 percent of the comparison mothers). Similarly, there were no significant group differences in family income (about 95 percent of each group had annual family incomes of less than \$7,000) or in maternal employment (72 percent of the mothers in the target group versus 68 percent of those in the comparison group were employed).

However, significant differences between the two

groups were found in the mothers' educational levels ($P < 0.01$). The target mothers as a group appeared to have lower educational levels; 85 percent of the target mothers versus 69 percent of the comparison mothers were not high school graduates. There were no significant differences between the groups with respect to family composition. The majority of mothers in both groups had not been married at the time of birth of the study child (56 percent of the target mothers versus 76 percent of the comparison mothers) or at the criterion reporting incident (68 percent of the target mothers versus 84 percent of the comparison mothers).

However, there was a noticeable difference between the two groups in ethnic background. Whereas the racial composition of the target group (44 percent American Indian, 30 percent black, and 26 percent white) paralleled the racial distribution of the county as a whole, the control group was heavily weighted toward black families (88 percent were black, 10 percent American Indian, and 2 percent white). In retrospect, it appears that Indian and white families are much less likely than blacks to live in public housing units, so that the racial distribution of the comparison group was skewed.

Characteristics of Child Maltreatment

The child maltreatment cases in our study primarily involved neglect (78 percent) rather than abuse (10 percent), although 12 percent were reported for both reasons. The mother was reported as the primary person perpetrating the maltreatment in more than three-quarters of the maltreatment cases. Finally, a larger proportion of the child maltreatment cases in our study than in the general population were of the less severe kind: 70 percent of the abuse cases and 89 percent of the neglect cases were classified in the least serious category. The most frequent kinds of abuse reported were cuts, bruises, and welts. In the neglect cases, physical neglect and lack of supervision were the two most frequent problems. In examining data on other children in the family, we found that abuse cases generally involved only one child, whereas neglect cases were likely to involve more than one: 90 percent of the abuse cases versus 20 percent of the neglect cases involved one child only.

To determine whether any of the study variables were associated with the kind or severity of child maltreatment, we examined the characteristics of parents in the target group (tables not shown). The kind of child maltreatment (abuse, neglect, or both) and its severity were not found to be significantly related to age of the mother, family structure, degree of social disorganization, level of social service utilization, or other sociodemographic factors. A significant relationship, how-

Table 2. Percentage utilization of social services by target and comparison groups before, at time of, and after criterion incident

Services received	Before Incident		At time of Incident		After Incident— target group
	Target group	Comparison group	Target group	Comparison group	
Casework counseling	70	¹ 90	92	92	94
Homemaker services	6	20	16	34	34
Day care	2	¹ 28	4	¹ 30	73
Health services	36	¹ 58	60	60	74
AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children)	48	¹ 88	60	¹ 84	79
Food stamps	54	¹ 85	64	¹ 86	66
Family planning	10	¹ 28	22	20	...
Mental health	8	0	10	0	...
Social security	2	0	2	0	...
WIN (work incentive program)	...	...	8	12	...
Any community resource	...	...	4	8	...
Vocational rehabilitation	...	...	0	8	...
Other	...	...	4	10	...
At least 1 DSS social service	78	98	94	96	96

¹ Significant at $P < 0.05$. NOTE: Leaders (...) Indicate not tabulated. DSS = local department of social services.

ever, was found between marital status and the kind of child maltreatment. Parents who abused their children were more likely to be married: 25 percent of the married parents were abusers compared with 3 percent of the unmarried. In contrast, parents who neglected their children were more likely to be unmarried: 85 percent of the unmarried parents versus 63 percent of the married neglected their children.

No other statistically significant differences were found among parents in the target group, although teenage mothers were slightly more likely than older mothers to neglect their children (83 percent versus 67 percent), whereas older mothers were more likely than teenage mothers to abuse their children (20 percent versus 6 percent). Also, mothers living alone or in extended family situations were more likely to neglect their children than married mothers living in nuclear families: 86 percent of mothers living alone and 90 percent of mothers living in extended family situations neglected their children versus 59 percent of married mothers living in nuclear families. In contrast, 23 percent of married mothers, 7 percent of mothers living alone, but none of the mothers in extended families were found to be abusive. Furthermore, mothers from those families that were highest on the summated scale of social disorganization were more likely to abuse as well as neglect their children. Nineteen percent of the most disorganized parents, as compared with 4 percent of the least disorganized, had both abused and neglected their children.

Finally, younger children were more likely to be abused, whereas older children were more likely to be

neglected. Fifteen percent of the youngest children, but only 4 percent of the oldest, were abused; 88 percent of the oldest children, but only 69 percent of the youngest, were neglected.

Social service utilization. To describe and analyze the pattern of social services provided across groups, two aspects of social service utilization were analyzed: the proportion of the target and the comparison group receiving any of 13 designated social services at three different periods and the mean number of services received by each of the two groups during these three periods.

The amount and kind of different social services received is shown in table 2. Before the criterion incident, 78 percent of the target group, compared with 98 percent of the comparison group, had received at least one service. However, by the time the child maltreatment report had been processed, almost all the target families (94 percent) were receiving some kind of social service. For members of both groups, general casework counseling was their major form of interaction with the DSS: more than 90 percent of the members of each group were receiving this service at the time of the criterion incident. Among specific cash or in-kind services, the most frequently used were AFDC, food stamps, and health services.

Whereas 84 percent of the comparison families were active AFDC recipients, less than 50 percent of the target families had received AFDC benefits in the period before the incident. After the child maltreatment report, 70 percent of the target group was receiving AFDC supplemental income, but this group's use of

AFDC had been significantly lower both before and at the time of the incident than the control group's. Since there were no significant income differences between the two groups at the time of the incident, and the target families were actually somewhat larger than the control families, this statistically significant difference in AFDC use does not appear to have been due solely to the financial eligibility criteria for AFDC.

There were also significant differences between the two groups with respect to the amount of day care services each used before and at the time of the incident. Although one might hypothesize that the use of day care facilities would lessen the burden of childrearing and thus be of particular importance to parents reported for child maltreatment, only 14 percent of the target families used such services in the period following the incident. Even so, this 14 percent represented a marked increase over the target families' use of day care services at the time of the incident. Clearly, however, the majority of the parents reported for child maltreatment were still not availing themselves of this service 12 months later.

Additionally, the generally low level of use of mental health services by target families seemed inconsistent with their probable need for psychological treatment. Given the significant differences between the two groups in psychological problems reported by caseworkers (such problems were reported for 53 percent of the target group as compared with 6 percent of the comparison group), much higher utilization rates for psychological services by the target group might have been logically expected. In fact, however, the control families did not avail themselves of mental health services, and only five of the target families had received such services.

As indicated in table 2, at all time periods, the target families were less likely to receive food stamps than the comparison families. In the pre-incident period, the target families also received fewer homemaker services than comparison families (6 percent versus 20 percent) and fewer health services (36 percent versus 58 per-

cent). However, by the time 1 year had elapsed after the reported incident, they received as much or even more of these services than the comparison group received at the time of the criterion incident (defined as their last contact with the DSS). The proportion of the target group using homemaker services 1 year after the incident (34 percent) was the same as the proportion of the comparison group at the time of the incident. Additionally, 1 year after the incident, 74 percent of the families in the target group were receiving some kind of health services as compared with 60 percent of the families in the comparison group at the time of the incident. Presumably, the greater use of health services by the target families reflected their slightly larger families.

In addition to specifying the proportion of families that received each kind of service, we calculated the mean number of services received by each group. As table 3 indicates, although the number of services increased for both groups over time, the target families not only used statistically fewer services before the criterion incident (mean of 2.16 versus 3.66) but also significantly fewer services at the time of the incident (mean of 3.28 versus 4.40). Further, the target families did not show an appreciable increase in their use of services after the maltreatment incident. There was some increase, but the level of use still remained significantly lower than that of the control families at the time of the incident (mean of 3.52 versus 4.40).

When service utilization was examined in relation to the mother's age at the birth of her first child (table not shown), the comparison mothers, regardless of age, were found to have received more services than the target mothers. Also, younger mothers, and particularly younger mothers in the target group, tended to receive slightly more services than older mothers did.

In addition to examining the match between service needs and utilization, we tested the relationships between utilization patterns and the age of the mother, family structure, level of social disorganization, and

Table 3. Mean number of social services received by target and comparison groups, before, at time of, and after criterion incident

Group	Before Incident		At time of Incident		After Incident	
	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation
Target	2.16	1.65	3.28	1.74	3.52	1.75
Comparison	3.66	1.31	4.40	1.73	...	...
T-test	¹ 5.10		¹ 3.99		¹ 2.82	

¹ Significant at $P < 0.01$.

other socioeconomic factors. In this way we determined whether an association existed between higher risk status and greater service utilization 1 year before the incident and at the time of the incident. As shown in table 4, the use of social services was not found to be related to the mother's age at first birth or to her age either before or at the time of criterion incident.

On the other hand, service utilization was found to be significantly related to the kind of family the mother had. An association was found between marital status and the level of service use. Both 1 year before the incident and at the time of the incident, unmarried mothers were significantly more likely to be receiving services than were married mothers ($r = -0.33$ and $r = -0.18$). A cross-tabulation analysis (table not shown) indicated that unmarried parents, as compared with married parents, had received more services before the

incident (75 percent of the unmarried parents versus 38 percent of the married received the greatest amount of services).

Although statistically significant differences in the services received before the incident were found among the three kinds of families ($r = -0.43$), these differences at the time of the incident were not found to be significant. Compared with married couples or mothers living in extended families, mothers living alone were much more likely to have been receiving social services before the incident. Among the mothers receiving the greatest number of services before the incident, 46 percent were living alone, 41 percent in extended families, and 14 percent in nuclear family marital units.

With the exception of the number of health abnormalities in children ($r = -0.22$ before the incident), none of the other individual or summated indicators of social disorganization correlated with the families' use of social services. That is, families that were more socially disorganized as measured by the indicators shown in table 4 were no more likely to be receiving social services than were those families that were classified as less socially disorganized. Similarly, no relationship was found between traditional measures of socioeconomic status and social service utilization.

Finally, a positive association was found between the use of social services and child maltreatment ($P < 0.05$). Those families that received the greatest amount of services were the least likely to maltreat their children. However, the correlation between the group and the number of services received diminished from the level before the incident to the level at the time of the incident ($r = 0.46$ to $r = 0.32$), probably as a result of the greater absolute use of services by target group families once they had been identified.

Comment

We were surprised to find no relationship between the degree to which families were socially disorganized and their use of social services. Apparently, social services were not being delivered to, or used by, the very families who by virtue of their higher levels of social disorganization probably had the greatest need for such additional support. Furthermore, the amount of social services that a woman received was related to her marital status, but not to the degree of social disorganization in her family. This observation suggests that at least in this setting, the criteria for provision of social services were more often based on the easily identifiable variable of marital status rather than on the more elusive concept of social disorganization.

Why no relationship was found between the degree of social disorganization and use of social services is un-

Table 4. Relationship between total amount of social service utilization and other factors

Factors	Probability	
	Before incident	At time of incident
Mother's age:		
At first birth . . . . .	.34	.19
Current . . . . .	.44	.22
Family structure:		
Marital status ¹ . . .	.001 ($r = -0.33$)	.04 ($r = -0.18$)
Family type ¹ . . . .	.001 ($r = -0.43$)	.10
Number in household . . . . .	.18	.37
Social disorganization:		
Psychological maladjustment . .	.15	.24
Child health abnormalities ¹ . .	.02 ($r = -0.22$)	.46
Family disturbance . . . . .	.29	.46
Family instability . . . . .	.40	.32
Police record . . . . .	.48	.19
Social isolation . . . . .	.37	.49
Family social disorganization . . . . .	.45	.44
Community disorganization . . . . .	.49	.19
Summated social disorganization . . . . .	.10	.28
Socioeconomic:		
Family income . . . . .	.08	.06
Mother's education . . . . .	.32	.15
Mother's occupation . . . . .	.44	.41
Ethnicity . . . . .	.47	.25
Target group ¹ . . . . .	.001 ($r = 0.46$)	.001 ($r = 0.32$)

¹ Significant at $P < 0.05$.
NOTE: Pearson correlation coefficients (r 's) are given for all significant relationships.

clear. In addition to the fact that the DSS does not use the degree of social disorganization as a key factor in determining a family's need for social services, it may be that the most socially disorganized families are unaware of, or resistant to, the available county social services.

The fact that when child maltreatment was identified, services were significantly increased suggests that the department of social services seeks to meet clients' needs once severe family disruption occurs. However, because parents not identified as child maltreaters were found to receive more cash and in-kind services than those who had been, the DSS might benefit from a re-examination of the amount and kind of social services that various groups or protective service clients need in relation to what they are actually getting.

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SYNOPSIS

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A secondary analysis of 100 case histories selected from social service records in a county department of social services (DSS) was conducted to examine the amount and kind of social services that persons identified as having maltreated a child received. Other objectives of

the analysis were to observe the pattern of social service utilization over time and to discover what, if any, factors were associated with receiving social services. To accomplish these study objectives, two groups were selected for analysis: a target group of 50 families that had been reported to the county DSS for child maltreatment and a group of 50 families that had never been so reported.

Both groups were composed mainly of young and socioeconomically deprived families that were characterized by poor incomes, little edu-

cation, and low occupational levels. Analyses revealed significant differences in the amount and type of social services used by families in the target group and the comparison group. Although family structure was found to be related to the total amount of social service utilization, the degree of social disorganization within the family did not correlate with utilization.

The study results indicate that the level of social services that protective service clients need and the level that they are actually getting should be re-examined.